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Virtual care 2020: What's next?

It's crucial to have a clear picture of the many ways virtual care will likely continue its transformation of health care delivery in 2020.

By **Dan Trencher** | January 03, 2020

Benefits professionals understand that increasing pressures to improve access while containing costs, combined with advancements in data and medical technologies, continue to drive the evolution of the health care industry. Though the jury is still out on the long-term impact of many technologies, one on which all parties agree is

including virtual care as part of any comprehensive health care program.

Given that, it's crucial to have a clear picture of the many ways virtual care (https://www.benefitspro.com/2019/12/26/beyond-routine-care-telemedicine-provides-access-to-chronic-disease-management/) will likely continue its transformation of health care delivery in 2020:

1. **Virtual care becomes a top priority for large employers and health systems**

The importance of virtual care is increasing for nearly all U.S. health plans, and the majority are offering or considering services. Building off the virtual care programs almost all large employers currently offer, 51 percent (https://www.businessgrouphealth.org/benchmarking/survey-reports/2020-report/) say that expanding virtual care options to their employees is a top priority in 2020. Sixty-four percent of U.S. hospitals and health systems now offer consumer virtual care programs, and an additional 24 percent plan to provide consumer telemedicine by year's end.

2. **Consumers will increasingly demand integrated, personalized care on their terms.**

Thanks to digital and "big data" technologies built around gaining consumer insights and customization, choice abounds in terms of where individuals turn to access products and services. As a result, both plan sponsors and consumers increasingly expect personalization and demand more control when it comes to quality health care, as well. Virtual care enables people to get the right treatment at the right time for resolution of their needs. As a result, utilization and advocacy are accelerating.

For plan or benefits administrators facing pushback from leadership or employees, a good selling point for virtual care is that customer satisfaction among users of telehealth services ranks among the highest of *any* consumer category, according to J.D. Power.

3. **Virtual care will help close the access gap for mental health care**

Mental illness, particularly anxiety and depression, is the leading chronic condition today. It affects more Americans than cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory diseases, and diabetes.

Related: States progressing on legislation to support telehealth services (https://www.benefitspro.com/2019/12/13/states-progressing-on-legislation-to-support-telehealth-services/)

As the infographic below demonstrates, a study of employees across the United States found only 20 percent felt mentally and emotionally healthy over a two-week period. This latest research provides benefits brokers with the information they need to remind their clients that mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety have adverse effects on productivity, decision-making, and interactions with other employees and customers. And stigma remains one of the most significant barriers t seeking help: 82 percent of employees who have had a mental health diagnosis hid their difficulties from workplace management (https://teladochealth.com /en/resources/white-paper/mental-health-in-the-workplace-global-impact-study/?utm_source=teladochealth&utm_medium=webpage&utm_campaign=wmhd& utm_content=impact-study-cta), mainly because they feared a negative impact on their career.

Yet 76 percent of patients with depression and 75 percent of those with anxiety reported improvement after the third visit or fourth visit, respectively, with a virtual care mental health provider. With reduced stigma and fewer barriers to care, more people get the right diagnoses, action plans and support needed to be mentally well and productive in work and life.

INSIGHT 2

Awareness of where to access help is lacking

36% are not aware of what resources are available to them in the workplace

53% believe more should be done in their workplace to promote better mental health

INSIGHT 3

Virtual care is delivering valuable impact

76% of members with depression improved after the third visit*

75% of members with anxiety improved after the fourth visit*

Source: "2019 Mental Health Workplace Study: Tackling a Global Mental Health Crisis in the Workplace," commissioned by Teladoc Health from Ipsos MORI of 1,000 employees across the United States."   *Analysis of Teladoc Health mental health service data

4. **Virtual care will reduce the challenges of treating people with chronic diseases.**

With the growing number of health claims that health plans process due to chronic conditions, benefits professionals can help their clients see how virtual care makes it easier for people to manage chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma, or obesity from the comfort of their own home or office. And for many diseases, virtual care proves more effective than in-person visits as a result of better care coordination and fewer barriers to access such as distance, mobility, and time constraints. For example, in a recent virtual care coaching study (https://mhealth.jmir.org/2017/6/e80/), 49 percent of participants with high blood pressure improved by an entire hypertensive stage, and 40 percent of those who participated in a virtual diabetes prevention program lost more than 5 percent of their total body weight.

5. **Physicians will increasingly seek training/support to provide effective virtual care.**

As the nation's population ages, the Association for American Medical Colleges estimates a shortage of as many as 131,000 physicians (https://aamc-black.global.ssl.fastly.net/production/media/filer_public/31/13/3113ee5c-a038-4c16-89af-294a69826650/2019_update_-_the_complexities_of_physician_supply_and_demand_-_projections_from_2017-2032.pdf), including 21,000-55,200 primary care doctors. As more doctors turn to virtual care as a means to reach more patients, we continue to see the rise of more specialized training and education for them. For instance, today we are already seeing leading medical schools launch the first specialized fellowships (https://www.jefferson.edu/university/jmc/departments/emergency_medicine/education/fellowships/telehealth_leadership.html) to educate the leaders of tomorrow to master virtual care to provide the care that patients need, when, and how they need it.

Ultimately, we anticipate the rise of specially trained "virtualists." These virtualist physicians will be supported by technology and clinical protocols that enable consistent, high-quality care and exceptional patient experience. In addition to medical training, physicians must have multi-disciplinary education on virtual care policy, clinical quality practices, and communication skills for effective patient interactions.

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